

Esther 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 05 July 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Esther chapter 1. Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa the citadel, in the third year of his reign, he gave a feast for all his officials and servants.

The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him, while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days. And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace. There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother of pearl, and precious stones. Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king, and drinking was according to this edict. There is no compulsion, for the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired. Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus. On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, and Abagtha, Zitha, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him. Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times, for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, the men next to him being Karshina, Shithar, Admatha, Tarshish, Merez, Marcina, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and

Media, who saw the king's face and sat first in the kingdom. According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?

Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, for the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come. This very day the noble women of Persia and Media, who have heard of the queen's behavior, will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty. If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus, and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike. This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script, and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household, and speak according to the language of his people. The book of Esther narrates the history that lies behind a feast, and it is a book that is full of feasts. The first chapter, the prologue to Esther's story, opens with a remarkable feast, and the final chapters of the book end with the institution of another, the feast of Purim.

As Adele Berlin notes, chapter 1 introduces us to several of the themes that will dominate the rest of the book. Feasts, insubordination, the king's search for a bride, rash edicts, intrigue in the court, and other such themes. The chapter opens by locating the story in the time of Ahasuerus, a Persian king, who ruled a vast empire stretching from India, or what would be modern-day Pakistan, to Ethiopia at its extremities. The Persian period began with the fall of Babylon in 539 BC.

[4 : 30] It ended with Alexander the Great in 333 BC. The precise identity of this figure is debated. He is not the only Ahasuerus in our Bibles. There is an Ahasuerus who was the father of Darius the Mede in Daniel chapter 9 verse 1. Another Ahasuerus is mentioned in Ezra chapter 4 verse 6. James Jordan has argued that Darius the Persian king, who reigned from 522 to 486 BC, a different figure from Darius the Mede in Daniel, is the same figure as Ahasuerus in Esther and Artaxerxes in Ezra and Nehemiah.

More commonly, however, scholars identify Ahasuerus with Exerxes. He reigned from 486 to 465 BC. The Septuagint and Josephus identify this figure as Artaxerxes, who reigned from 465 to 424 BC.

The identification of Ahasuerus as Exerxes rests in large measure upon the strong evidence that Ahasuerus is the Hebrew version of the same Persian term that has rendered Exerxes in Greek.

Not dissimilar to the Babylonian version of the name. Had the figure been named Artaxerxes, we would have expected a T in Ahasuerus, as Anthony Tomasino points out. Jordan's position depends upon the argument, for which by his own admission little supportive evidence exists, that Persian monarchs use multiple throne names such as Darius, Exerxes and Artaxerxes. Further biblical data to fit into the picture can be found in Ezra chapter 4, which mentions various Persian kings in succession.

Cyrus, possibly Darius again, Ahasuerus, Artaxerxes and Darius. In Ezra, Nehemiah and also in Esther chapter 2 verse 5 to 6, we have references to exiles and their descendants. This genealogical data may place chronological constraints upon the text. Jordan's position is strongest in this in a biblical evidence. However, there remain difficulties. For instance, if as Jordan argues, Mordecai was personally taken into exile from Judah, his advanced age at this point would raise problems for an assumption of Esther's youth. As some commentators have noted, the more general identification of Ahasuerus with Exerxes would fit neatly with what we know of the chronology of his reign. In 483 BC, the third year of his reign that is mentioned in this chapter, Exerxes was assembling his war council to prepare to attack the Greeks. Scholars have long challenged the historicity of the book of Esther. The identification of Ahasuerus with Exerxes is not without its problems, for instance. Herodotus writes about the brutal queen of Exerxes, Emestris. This vengeful and cruel queen seems to have been active long after Vashti was deposed, and her character seems to be the polar opposite of the biblical heroine who is the subject of this book. Scholars have raised further questions of historical accuracy concerning this book. The reference to 127 provinces, for instance, would, some claim, be as jarring as reading about 400 different US states. Persia was divided into about 20 different satrapies, not over 120 provinces. Besides this, there are details such as the irrevocability of the law of the Medes and the Persians, the height of Haman's gallows, the suggestion that Exerxes would elevate two nun Persians to the status of prime minister within his regime, the choice of a queen of Persia through a beauty contest, instead of marrying a daughter of one of the leading families.

[8 : 05] Those who argue for the historicity of the book of Esther have ready answers for many of these objections. The book of Esther clearly distinguishes between satraps and governors. The provinces that it describes are clearly under the rule of governance, not under the rule of satraps as the satrapies are.

Many details of the book clearly ring historically true, and fit in with what we know of the period. Despite himself questioning the historicity of the book, David Clines lists a number of the historical details that ring true within it. The extent of the empire under Exerxes from India to Ethiopia, in chapter 1 verse 1. The council of seven nobles, in chapter 1 verse 14. The efficient postal system, chapter 3 verse 13 and 8 verse 10. The keeping of official diaries, including records of the king's benefactors, chapter 2 verse 23, chapter 6 verse 8. The use of impalement as a form of capital punishment, chapter 2 verse 23, 5 verse 14, 7 verse 10. The practice of obeisance to kings and nobles, chapter 3 verse 2. Belief in lucky days, chapter 3 verse 7. Setting crowns on the heads of royal horses, chapter 6 verse 8. Reclining on couches at meals, chapter 7 verse 8. To these, Tomasino adds the names that we have within the book, which clearly are appropriate to the time and the place.

Recognising the accuracy of these incidental and scene-setting details, the case for trusting the book on some of the more controversial and less substantiated details might be stronger.

The great feast of Ahasuerus with which the book begins should not be regarded merely as a matter of decadent self-indulgence. As Rabbi David Foreman has argued, within a great kingdom, order needs to be kept and one of the ways that this can be established is through grand spectacle and great feasts.

Within this great feast and the celebrations surrounding it, Ahasuerus could wow the governors of the various provinces with his wealth and splendour. His bountiful generosity as a host and benefactor would also win their support and loyalty. The reference to the 127 provinces here, the first of three times within the book, gives a sense of the great extent of the kingdom of Ahasuerus.

[10 : 21] However, some Jewish commentators have seen something more going on here. Could the number have a symbolic significance? Some have noted that the number is 12 times 10 plus 7, all numbers associated in some way with completion and perfection. More interesting, however, is the fact that the number 127 is only found on one other occasion in scripture, in reference to the age of Sarah.

In Genesis chapter 23 verse 10, we're told that Sarah died at the age of 127. Could there be some connection between the story of Sarah and the story of Esther? Some Jewish commentators, including Foreman, have suggested that there might be. While I've not seen anyone mention this, such a connection could be strengthened by the number 180, which appears shortly afterwards. There is only one other occurrence of the number 180 in scripture. In Genesis chapter 35 verse 28, it is the age of Isaac when he dies. 127, the age of Sarah, and 180, the age of Isaac, her son. Sarah, like Esther, was taken on account of her beauty by a pagan king and had to hide her identity to save her people. Isaac is the great promised seed.

Perhaps what we have here is an indication of some of the themes of the book, by a subtle allusion to some figures that share a typological resemblance. The great feast with which this time of feasting concludes, in verse 5 and following, is a feast to which all are invited. It lasts for seven days, and the festivities and the furnishings are described for us at some length. This is rather atypical for the biblical text, which seldom gives much attention to visual details and scene setting. Rabbi Foreman suggests that these details may evoke the consecration of the tabernacle. In Leviticus chapter 8 verse 23, for instance, and you shall not go outside the entrance of the tent of meeting for seven days, until the days of your ordination are completed, for it will take seven days to ordain you. Seven days for a great inauguration or sanctification event, lengthy descriptions of glorious materials, and the summoning of particular persons to enter into the presence of the great king, might all evoke the story of the consecration of the tabernacle. The drinking of great quantities of wine are highlighted here. In the story of Leviticus, after the death of Nadab and Abihu, the drinking of wine is expressly forbidden, which has led many to suppose that the deaths of Nadab and

Abihu followed after their rash actions following the drinking of wine. So while the story of Esther chapter 1 may evoke the consecration of the tabernacle, it might do so in order to stand in some sort of contrast to it. As the lord's burning anger came out and burnt up Nadab and Abihu, Ahasuerus' anger is caused to burn against his queen Vashti. What exactly happens in verses 10 and following is much debated by commentators. Many commentators see here the lecherous and dishonourable actions of a drunken king.

Indeed, traditionally many Jewish commentators argued that Queen Vashti was summoned into the king's presence, naked, wearing nothing but the royal crown. Rabbi Foreman raises a different possibility.

[13 : 33] The beautiful queen, he argues, is not just an attractive woman to be lusted after. There are numerous such women among the dancing girls or the concubines. Rather, Queen Vashti in her royal crown represents the glory of Persia itself. Wearing the royal crown, she is a symbol of the kingdom. The king is summoning her at the height of the feast, at the culmination of the celebration on the great final day, when he is happy and everything seems to be right. But her refusal to come at this point invites a great crisis.

This great spectacle of Ahasuerus' pomp and power and the glories of his kingdom, which was supposed to be crowned with the presentation of the glory of his queen, is spoiled by her non-appearance.

Whereas all of his guests were supposed to be impressed by his might, generosity and benefaction, now all of this will be overshadowed by his queen's dishonouring of him. Other commentators read this situation differently. Many feminist commentators, for instance, have seen this as the queen's assertion of her dignity, her refusal to be dishonoured or to be reduced to the status of a common concubine. The concubines were the ones that should come out at this point, not the queen.

Vashti, however, is not a hero in the biblical text. Esther chapter 1 does not seem to be written to invite us to respond either very positively or negatively to any of these figures. That said, as she is a foil for the character of Esther, if anything, Vashti is presented in a more negative light. Esther will be what Vashti failed to be. When the king goes to his advisors for counsel, Memucan gives him advice that may seem rather hyperbolic, presenting the actions of Queen Vashti as a societal crisis. While this is almost certainly greatly overstated, we should not miss the possible element of truth to his claims. Ahasuerus is trying to rule the kingdom through spectacle, and a bad spectacle, such as that created by Queen Vashti, may cause problems throughout his realm.

As a consequence of her actions, Memucan advises that Queen Vashti be banished from the king's presence. She would lose much of her power and influence as a result. This decree concerning Queen Vashti was then to be proclaimed throughout all of the kingdom of King Ahasuerus, in order that, as the people saw the consequences of Vashti's actions, wives would be deterred from dishonouring their husbands, as Vashti had done. A question to consider. In his treatment of the Book of Esther, Yoram Hazoni presents the character of Ahasuerus as dominated by an appetite for rule and desire for control. Vashti exists not as a companion for Ahasuerus, but more as a symbol of his greatness and glory. She is seldom by his side, but must come when summoned. When she dishonours the proud king, the king, to save face, blows up the issue into a matter of state, and the flattering counsellors that he has gathered around him merely protect him from the truth about himself. How do you assess the characters of Ahasuerus and Vashti? Does the biblical text itself give us any clues as to its perspective upon them?